

Michigan COMMENTARY

Extremist Politics

by Craig Ruff

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Welcome back to extremist politics. America's politics broker the disparate economic interests of her people. When pocketbooks are less full, as they are today, common interests decline. Passion replaces reason and fear replaces confidence. Self-interest reigns supreme. Empathy wanes. People grope for easy political answers and explanations. They find them not in centrist politics, but in radical politics.

Nothing controls the tone and tenor of politics quite like the economic times; not just the politics of America, but of all societies. When the economy goes south, politics explode east and west along an ideological spectrum. Political centrism collapses with the devaluation of currency, unemployment, shortages of food, fear of job loss, and decline in living standards. People find solace in, not contempt for, radical ideologies and personalities. Inasmuch as the establishment brought despair, the establishment is rejected.

Combine bad economic times with contempt for governing institutions and a powder keg is ignited. Such a powder keg produced Hitler and Lenin. It also produced Walesa and Gorbachev. Contempt for the status quo produced nazism and communism. Lately, it has brought democratic freedoms to Eastern Europe and Russia.

Contempt has no ideological rudder. It simply rejects prevailing thought. The German people in 1932 could have turned as easily to communism as to fascism. Russians in 1917 could have turned as easily to democracy as to communism. If Russians today are impatient, the democratic goals of Yeltsin and Shevardnadze will fall into disrepute and the people will adopt fascism or czarist tyranny as easily as they would restore communism.

In bad times people want easy answers. Ideologies produce easy answers. Ideologies explain why bad things happen to good people. Religious faith, which is arational, provides solace in much the same way that political ideology does. They explain the inexplicable. Yeats described the "Second Coming" much as political scientists and observers might describe contemporary global politics.

Americans today perceive economic and political impoverishment. We are not living through another Great Depression. We are not even living through the severity of the back-to-back recessions of 1981-82. Yet, as one economist wrote in the *New York Times* recently: "The economy stinks." American political leaders and institutions are less corrupt than perhaps ever before. Yet, there is an overwhelming public sentiment that government is not to be trusted and its leaders are not to be believed.

Perception and emotion outweigh reality and reason in 1991. The confluence of beliefs that both the economy and our governance stink produces extremism.

The scattered election results of early November show rejection of neither Republicans nor Democrats, conservatives nor liberals. The voters rejected the status quo, whatever that status quo was in each state. Thornburgh did not lose because he was a Republican; he lost because he was in the establishment. Half the Democrats in New Jersey's assembly did not lose because they were Democrats; they lost because they were the governing elite who participated in tax hikes. Mabus did not lose reelection as Mississippi's governor because he was a Democrat but because he was governor. The losers of early November were the political center; the winners were the leftists and rightists who ran against the center.

Moderates beware: You have nothing to lose but your seats. The half-cocked public is mad. They are mad at you. You can pander to the public's greed, fears, anxiety, and groping for quick fixes and win reelection. You can stay the centrist course, act rationally and reasonably, pursue temperate and tolerant policies, and get knocked off. In the end history will reward you, but your contemporaries will deal you a bad hand indeed.

I fear for the political center in America and Michigan. What will happen to decent, tolerant, effective, moderate legislators like Paul Hillegonds, Lew Dodak, Mike Griffin, Shirley Johnson, Ken Sikkema, Joe Schwarz, Art Miller, Ralph Ostling, Jim Berryman, John Cherry, and Vern Ehlers? I fear for a coherent and consistent centrism, the bulwark of American and Michigan politics. In the long haul, centrism will prevail. Eras of quirky and ephemeral extremism nonetheless mete out excruciating punishment on sensible political leaders and public alike.

Centrists are not passionate people. They plod along, incrementally changing policy, adapting rather than discarding, calming rather than rousing. Their conviction, hence, resembles defensiveness: the defense of tradition, routine, and institutions. They master the inside game. They are the glue of our governing institutions. The "establishment" protects customs and foundations, easy targets of extremist times.

American history is littered with eras of extremism, commonly labeled populism. That is a far too charitable word. Under populism's umbrella, the Know Nothings sought to cut off immigration, the Anti-Masons to extirpate Freemasonry, the Populists to blame all moral and economic problems on the Industrial Revolution, the Klan to lynch blacks, Huey Long to socialize America, and Father Coughlin and Henry Ford to incite antisemitism. Economic hardship spawned these movements. Hardship searches for scapegoats. Populism is the politics of blame.

A lot of Americans and Michigianians are vulnerable just now to populist pleas: The common man fighting against the greed of the haves, whites whose jobs will be taken away by blacks through racial quotas, blacks whose jobs and lives will be controlled by Jews or parasitic whites, and small business owners who will be run out of business by mega-merged conglomerates. Exploiting anxiety is the hallmark of populism. So too are the disparagement of success, intolerance of religious, racial, and economic difference, and antipathy toward elitism in all forms (such as advanced education, culture, and the arts). Simply put, populism neatly ascribes blame for suffering to somebody else. It consoles the sufferers artificially by claiming that the successful got ahead only on their backs and at their expense.

The only genuine solace in life is self-confidence. Throughout most of America's history, we have been self-confident. We have not needed to find scapegoats, grope for quick fixes, or resent the success of others.

Self-confidence will return. When it does, David Duke will be a forgotten, forlorn figure—an afterthought—in American political history. The lesson that Duke and others like him should teach us is that their appeal rests solely on our weakness and fragility. In the next era of economic and political poverty, may we find somewhat more self-confidence to insulate us from such suffering and abuse. The fault lies not in David Duke, but in ourselves.